

Testimony of Ken Toll, Vice President  
Michigan 2-1-1, Inc.

February 24, 2009

Mr. Chair, Members of the Committee, my name is Ken Toll. Nearly eight years ago I began leading development of a 2-1-1 call center in Jackson; I now actively participate on the management team of Central Michigan 2-1-1 (which serves Jackson and six other counties) in the course of my duties as Executive Director of United Way of Jackson County.

Through no fault of her own, Sherry's presentation really did not do justice to 2-1-1. I am not exaggerating when I say that it is impossible to fully describe what happens when a caller in need connects with 2-1-1. I urge every one of you to pay a visit to your local call center, or to any of the 2-1-1 call centers operating in Michigan. It is impressive to observe the highly skilled call specialists as they simultaneously search resource databases while assessing each caller's stated (and sometimes unstated) needs. It is more impressive to see how these professionals use the database of services, and their broad knowledge of human service institutions and systems, to engage in complex problem-solving with callers who are facing a myriad of issues and needs. But what you hear in the callers' voices is far more impactful. You hear some discover hope, which had been lost after a long and fruitless search for help. Some callers become more confident advocates for themselves, after learning how to access services and/or discovering how helpful the "right" service can actually be. Even in those cases where the database has no resources and no help can be offered by the Call Specialist, the caller often expresses relief at knowing that there is no need to continue searching.

Consider these reasons supporting 211, from "50 Ways 211 Works." And "Potential Cost savings to State Gov't by Implementing 211" (a paper prepared in support of statewide 2-1-1 service for Washington State).

4. Earlier Diagnosis of Problems and Access to Support.

Studies show that most individuals average 14 calls in search of help. Many give up before they reach the service that could help; many more access less suitable services which ultimately creates additional costs for the public and private human service network.

7. Getting People "Out of the System".

Many people on state support cycle in and out of the state's safety net. People with access to a whole spectrum of services are more likely to be successful and eventually self-sufficient; however, without the guidance of a 2-1-1 call specialist, most people stop

searching when they locate one program...and they may never overcome the root causes of their issues.

5. Benefits Maximization: 2-1-1 provides basic information and connection to public income and insurance benefits such as the Children's Health Insurance Program.

This is the kind of conversation often heard in a 2-1-1 call center: "OK, here's an organization with mortgage assistance available. While you're grabbing a pencil, can I ask why you need this assistance? Would a household budgeting class help?...oh, you had some unexpected medical bills for your child last month; sounds like that child might qualify for MIChild, which would cover most of his health care bills. Can I tell you more about how to enroll him?" 2-1-1 connects residents with all available public services, and helps Michigan maximize our capture of federal assistance dollars.

26. Health Education Campaigns: 2-1-1 provides an easy way for government to do short and long term public information and education campaigns.

7. Travelers' Aid:

8. ESL Help:

We saw the importance of both of these during the first week of 2-1-1 service in Jackson County. A City police officer phoned 2-1-1 after being called to the train station, where he found a non-english-speaking man who was confused. Our translation service was immediately patched in, and we learned that he had boarded a bus in Brownsville, Texas and thought he was in Jacksonville, Florida. He did not have a dollar.

The man was instructed to wait. 2-1-1 staff contacted a local, active church; it not only purchased him a bus ticket and helped him contact his waiting family, but its members brought him lunch and sent him off with money for dinner on the road.

9. Reliable, Comprehensive Human Services Database:

2-1-1 provides a comprehensive, continuously updated human service database for everyone. You can access this data to serve constituents, to market Michigan's caring communities to businesses, and to help guide your policy decisions concerning human services. We are now exploring how to best link all of Michigan's 2-1-1 databases together into a single, immensely powerful resource.

11. No stigma, confidential:

16. 9-1-1 Relief: 2-1-1 provides an outlet for the non-emergency calls that can flood 9-1-1 centers during a disaster.

20. Suicide Prevention:

22. Reporting Scams Aimed at the Elderly:

23. Reduce Government Waste:

32. Volunteer Opportunities: 2-1-1 provides a single point of entry to give back, as well as to get help.

27. Responds to Individual Needs: .

12. Alternative solutions and plans:

2-1-1 helps people with multi-faceted problems – such as a sudden serious illness. Many people need help but find it hard to formulate a plan. They just know what their predicament is.

One last example from Central Michigan 2-1-1; a woman phone distraught that her house had gone through foreclosure and she had been given 48 hours to vacate. She revealed to the Call Specialist that she had no family and nowhere to go; she had just realized that she and her two adolescent boys would soon be living in her car. Her husband had passed away some months ago, and he had always managed the household finances. After his death she continued doing what she had always done – sorting the mail and throwing the bills in a drawer. She had the money, but never opened any of the bills; when she did call the mortgage broker earlier that day, she was told it was too late. And now she would soon be homeless.

The Call Specialist was able to refer her to a program which somehow got the eviction stopped. She was also connected with a financial assistance program, and she and her boys entered grief counseling. She later stood before a crowd and credited 2-1-1 with saving her home, and her life.

1. Laid-Off Workers:

2-1-1 provides one memorable number that works for any kind of health or human service need. In a *Brookings Institution* Study, researchers reviewed the experience of laid-off hotel workers after the September 11th attacks and found that even when social service agencies were doing a good job making housing, food, and other assistance available, displaced workers couldn't figure out how to get help. Pat Atkins, a researcher from George Washington University noted that 2-1-1 “... enables people to get assistance before they decide to give up.” Again, something very special, and very effective, happens during that personal contact with a Call Specialist.

211 obviously works, and it works at many levels – simple and complex, immediate and long-term, superficial and fundamentally life-changing. Last year, I had the pleasure of presenting 2-1-1 at the Michigan Association of Counties conference. I invited our local DHS Director to join me. I was not surprised when she told that group that, in her four decades of experience in the human services, 2-1-1 is the single best innovation she has ever witnessed. I agree.

2-1-1 has proven its ability to conserve our state's resources. It makes sense financially, and it ends or reduces human suffering to boot. However, most of

Michigan's call centers have been living on community support for years, and are facing the same revenue challenges as other nonprofit services, exactly at a time when we need 2-1-1 more than ever. Jackson recently convened our 40 leading emergency service providers to coordinate our response to the growing numbers of homeless and hungry, and the first statement uttered when we tasked them with developing that plan was "Thank God we have 2-1-1." We need your help to keep 2-1-1, and to make it available to all. Thank you.